

## COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING COMMITTEE

Fiscal Year 2007

### Synopsis

In the recently elapsed fiscal year, the Comprehensive Planning Committee (CPC) moved into high gear as it made the transition from “Planning the Plan” to preparing the actual Master Plan. In the course of those twelve months, the CPC completed its essential outreach and drafting work and turned its findings over to the consultants, who prepared to write up the first full version of the document.

### Major Accomplishments and Activities

The crucial step toward the end of the previous fiscal year (FY 06) was the hiring, in May, of consultants to guide the public-input phase of the planning process and prepare the resultant draft of the Master Plan. The CPC selected a team comprising ACP-Visioning & Planning, Ltd. (lead consultant and primary contact), Stantec Consulting (for assistance with select components such as Services and Facilities and Transportation and Circulation), and David Loomis of the University of Massachusetts (for design and implementation of the scientific and legally defensible public survey), with additional support from the Environmental Simulation Center (ESC) and Green Mountain Geographics (land use maps). The Principal in Charge at ACP was Jamie Greene (Columbus, OH), assisted by Project Manager Jennifer Lindbom (New York).

Two practical factors had a determining influence on the course of our work:

(1) As ACP had cautioned, and last year’s CPC report noted, one consequence of the lower price that the Town voted to pay the consultants (\$200,000 rather than the \$300,000 that “Planning the Plan” consultant Jeanne Armstrong considered necessary when she wrote the Request for Proposals) was a higher price in what might be termed “sweat equity” on the part of Town staff and CPC volunteers alike: more frequent committee sessions, a heavier personal commitment in the form of organizing public meetings, compiling data, drafting and editing documents, and the like.

(2) In the late summer and early fall of 2006, the Select Board significantly increased the size of the CPC, hoping, it said, to make the body more representative of Town bodies and citizens. The CPC thereby grew from 18 voting members plus three non-voting college/university liaisons plus one non-voting Select Board liaison, to 27 voting members plus three non-voting college/university liaisons plus one non-voting Select Board liaison plus a shift from the two Planning Board representatives, both voting members in the previous configuration of 18, to becoming non-voting liaisons. Appointments to fill the greater number of seats took place over many months, through November 2006. Membership records are available for review in the Planning Department.

A related significant change took place in November 2006, when longtime CPC Chair Alisa Brewer stepped down during the campaign preceding her election to the Select Board. In a seamless transition, two of the newly appointed CPC members assumed leadership positions with ease and professionalism: Eric Nakajima (Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee), as Chair, and Cheryl Zoll (at large), as Vice-Chair, filling the vacancy left by Bob Grose, the last remaining original member of the Committee.

The actual work of the CPC can (ironically, perhaps) be more easily summarized than the process.

Under Massachusetts General Law (MGL Chapter 41 Section 81D), the creation of a Master Plan requires “an interactive public process, to determine community values, goals and to identify patterns of development that will be consistent with these goals.” We chose our consultants in part on the basis of their extensive experience in leading such a public-input process. Given the robust civic culture of Amherst, our process, extending from September 2006 to September 2007, was far more extensive than most.

Last fall, over 500 residents participated in 10 idea-gathering sessions and generated over 1,200 ideas concerning the direction that the Town needs to take. From January through June, 27 members of the CPC joined with fellow residents in 7 work groups (devoted, respectively, to the “substantive” elements of a Massachusetts Master Plan: Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Natural and Cultural Resources, Open Space and Recreation, Services and Facilities, Transportation and Circulation). They identified broad goals and objectives from the themes that emerged from the idea-gathering sessions and generated some 250 corresponding specific strategies. We tested public support for our proposals at a public forum in March, and through a scientifically designed twelve-page survey distributed to a random sample of Town residents in the late spring. By June 2007 and the end of the fiscal year, the work groups completed work on their draft strategies. As we awaited the survey results, we began to contemplate the adoption process that would follow completion of the Master Plan itself.

### Issues

Throughout the planning process, ACP maintained regular contact with the CPC Chair and Town of Amherst Senior Planner Niels la Cour and issued monthly written reports on key dates and deliverables. That the work of the CPC was behind deadline early on became a recurrent “red flag” item in these reports. The initial timeline had envisioned formation of the work groups in the early fall, distribution and analysis of the survey from November through March, and completion of the Master Plan – beginning of the adoption process – by the end of the fiscal year.

The question of schedule – both the extent to which a deadline was compelling, and the reasons for being behind schedule – thus also became a recurrent theme in CPC meetings. CPC members were reminded of the Special Town Meeting action of November 15, 2004 on Article 27, Extension of the Phased Growth Bylaw, which by a 2/3 vote provided five calendar years from November 15, 2004 in order to provide the Town time to prepare and implement a master plan.

A proper analysis of real or perceived problems in the Planning Amherst Together process – and their influence on the final character and quality of the Master Plan – should await the calmer time after the completion of the document, but will be crucial to its successful adoption and implementation.

In the interim, one might at least venture to offer the following as a provisional and limited but objective assessment: The CPC membership expansion clearly slowed down the planning process, but both the extra time and increased representation contributed in their way to increasing public acceptance of both the idea and substance of the Master Plan. Debates over

timing simultaneously highlighted and masked deeper controversies over political values and responsibilities, which will properly be conducted in the open and in the practical arena of the Planning Board, Select Board, and other appropriate bodies.

#### Final status

At the end of the fiscal year in June, all work groups had submitted their draft objectives and strategies, and the principal public-input processes had been completed. The CPC planned to meet only occasionally over the next two months, until it was ready to receive the complete draft of the Master Plan from ACP toward the end of August.

#### Future plans

The CPC assumes the Master Plan will be submitted for Planning Board acceptance in FY 08. The CPC assumes the Planning Board will adopt an Amherst Master Plan in time to show progress on Master Plan implementation by November 2009.

Respectfully submitted,

James Wald  
CPC Vice-Chair and Acting Chair